

# Balancing Life's Responsibilities a Juggling Act



**Balancing work and family can be a juggling act for all of us. But toss in education, and the juggling becomes a lot more challenging.**

A recent two-year study by University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville reveals just how challenging it can be. The study shows “there are some unique characteristics of our GED students who enter college,” Janice Hanlon, GED program manager, says. They have a broader age spread, more responsibilities outside of school, and, often, fewer resources. To balance work and family responsibilities with class work, these students are more likely to go to school part-time or to attend school in stops and spurts.

The study compared GED graduates with high school graduates who entered the community college at Batesville as freshmen in the fall of 2004. The freshman class consisted of 57 GED graduates and 240 high school graduates. Nearly a fourth of the high school graduates were part-time students, while about a third of the GED graduates were part-time.

In general, the GED students were a little better prepared for college – 22.8 percent needed a developmental course whereas 28.3 percent of the high school graduates required one. While the GED students outperformed their high school counterparts in reading and writing, they were more likely to need developmental math.

“They have a very good intense training in our adult ed classes in those areas (reading and writing),” Janice says, so the GED graduates “feel comfortable in those areas.” However, this study shows adult ed students may need to focus more on math, she adds.

Although the GED graduates may enter college better prepared, as a group they don’t perform quite as well – possibly because of all the other demands on their time, Janice says. At the end of the fall semester, about 21 percent of the high school and 30 percent of the GED graduates were on academic probation. The GED students also maintained lower grade point averages.

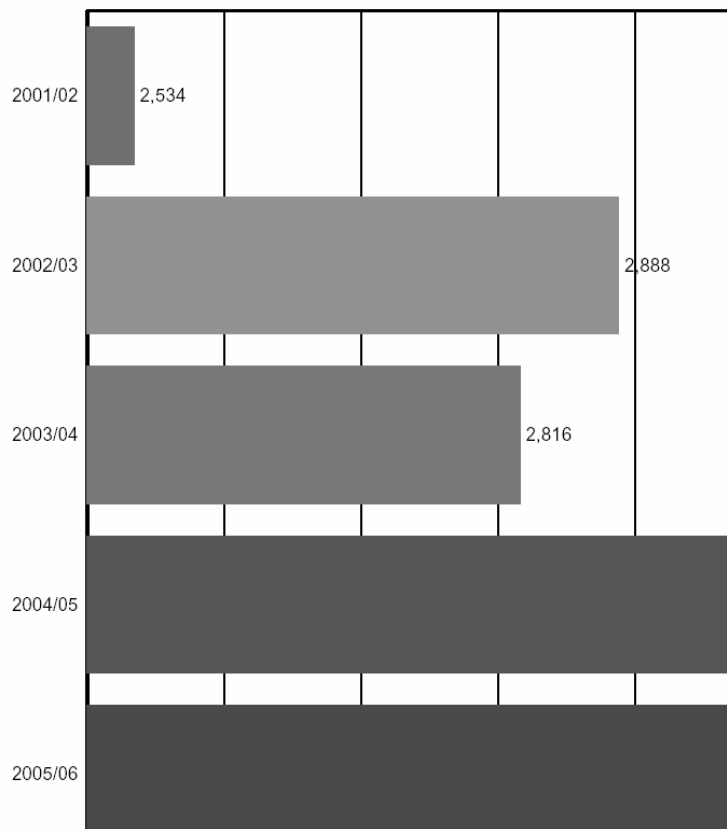
While both groups had similar retention rates for the second semester, nearly 44 percent of the high school graduates were still in school by the fourth semester while only a third of the GED graduates were still in school. There may be a number of reasons for this disparity, Janice says. For instance, more of the GED students may have been enrolled in one-year certificate programs. And because of their other responsibilities, many of them may have had to sit out a year or two and then return to school. A longer study could help determine these reasons.

The study, the first of its type in the state, “shows that we need to provide some special kind of services to our GED graduates,” Janice says.

When coupled with statewide retention rates for GED graduates, which consistently run between 25 percent to 29 percent, Janice says the study demonstrates the importance of addressing the specific needs of adult students, who often struggle with transportation issues, financial aid, and affordable and dependable child care – on top of trying to keep up with school work.

Despite the challenges, more and more Arkansas GED graduates are going on to college or a university. Slightly more than 2,500 GED students enrolled as freshmen in Arkansas colleges

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and universities in 2001-02; nearly 3,000 enrolled in 2004-05. And this past year, GED graduates made up 11.6 percent of the statewide entering freshman class.

While some GED students may not make it through to graduation, others – like Chris Pleimann and Kathy Davis – will manage to balance the academic life with all their other responsibilities. Chris, who got his GED through the Fayetteville Adult Education Center, went on to earn an associate degree in criminal justice and is now a patrol officer.

Kathy had more of a struggle. After passing her GED tests, Kathy attended college for two years before family responsibilities forced her to quit. With encouragement from her co-workers, Kathy kept her promise to herself to return to college years later. She now has a bachelor's degree in computer information systems and was the first in her family to get a college degree.

*(For more inspiring stories about GED graduates and other nontraditional students who successfully juggled college with work and family, visit <http://dwe.arkansas.gov/gobackmoveforward/resourceguide2005.pdf>.)*